

Head Start, school lunches and social programs targeted for elimination

The Congressional Budget Office points US spending priorities towards “great power” conflicts: Part Two

Guillaume Garnier, Nancy Hanover
21 January 2019

Last December the Congressional Budget Office issued a report “Options for Reducing the Deficit 2019 to 2028.” It sounds the alarm over the growth of the federal deficit. In 2018 the deficit—the difference between federal outlays and income—was \$779 billion. This deficit is projected to grow to \$984 billion in 2019.

While the document purports to critically and objectively review all government spending including the largest portion of discretionary allocations—the military budget—the practical outcome of the report will be to increase military spending while spearheading a fundamental assault upon what remains of America’s social programs.

Many of the budget choices outlined by the CBO for the new Congress are breathtaking in their sweep and implications for US society. They include the complete elimination of Head Start (a projected “savings” of \$92 billion between 2020-2028); turning the food stamp program—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—into smaller block grants; and cutting the federally-subsidized school lunch program.

Further “options” include: eliminating tens of thousands of federal employees through attrition and eliminating all annual cost-of-living adjustments for those who remain; ending NASA’s funding for human exploration and operations in space starting in 2020; reducing funding for technology development in fossil fuel energy, nuclear energy, energy efficiency, and renewable energy programs to roughly 25 percent of their 2018 amounts; eliminating federal funding for Amtrak train service; reducing state subsidies for mass transit and eliminating the Federal Transit Administration which assists local and regional transit systems; increasing the cost for tenants in federally-assisted housing and more.

Should any reader consider such ideas merely empty threats, these “options” should be placed in the context of the Trump administration’s threat to defy Congress and establish a “state of emergency” to build a wall on the Mexican border. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, such a measure would be a historical turning point, from which there could be no return. Under such circumstances, it would become plausible for a “state of emergency” to be invoked over government “gridlock” or the national debt crisis to implement the severe attacks postulated in the CBO report and more, including gutting Medicare and Social Security.

In other words, the “options” proposed by the CBO, while advisory and noncommittal, are a harbinger of attacks to come. It is clear from the outset that the cabal of bankers and executives that control the American political system would prefer mass hunger in the streets before the prospect of a dip in their portfolios.

Many of the enumerated policy options would be devastating for children, public education and public health. They include:

*The end of Head Start, a program of the Department of Health and Human Services, which provides access to early childhood education (preschool) for hundreds of thousands of working-class children. It also includes health screenings and dental checkups across the US. Since its inception in 1965 as a core part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” reforms, Head Start has allowed over 25 million young children to attend preschool. In 1994 it was expanded adding Early Head Start to assist children from birth to age three.

Head Start is one of the social programs which most directly intersects with the daily lives of working class and

poor Americans. The widely expanded access to preschool, medical services, and childcare that resulted from the establishment of Head Start was a significant gain by the working class. The termination of the program would be catastrophic both for the students who would be denied a proper beginning of their education and for their working-class parents who often cannot afford childcare.

In addition, the growth of poverty in the US has dramatically increased the need for the program. As early as 2016, the National Institute for Early Education Research estimated that as many as 75 percent of children eligible for Head Start programs might not be able to access them due to insufficient funding. At that time, over 915,000 students participated in the program.

The CBO report ignores the terrible escalation of poverty and the plight of poor families with young children. It ludicrously claims, “The main argument for this option is that many of the children expected to be enrolled in Head Start in the future would be enrolled in alternative preschool or child care programs (both public and private) if Head Start was eliminated.”

*Cutting \$1 billion annually from global health programs. The US currently spends about \$9 billion on appropriations to combat HIV/AIDS, prevent child and maternal deaths and reduce the threat of infectious diseases. Justifications for these cuts include the suggestion that if the programs have not yet been successful perhaps “further spending in that category might not be as valuable” or perhaps “other organizations” will increase their investments.

*Supplementary disability income (SSI) for children, the CBO suggests, could be cut by as much as \$100 billion. The language of the report discussing the merits of SSI, a program which seeks to assist many of the most impoverished and vulnerable, reprises that of the extreme right wing. It states, “Eliminating SSI benefits for children may encourage their parents to increase work.” It is already the case that increasing numbers of the elderly, blind and disabled living on the meager benefits of SSI are going hungry or becoming homeless. The maximum monthly payment is a minuscule \$750, with most recipients having (usually expensive) special needs.

*Drastic cuts to college loans and programs. The report suggests reducing Pell Grants, provided to low-income college students (\$31-62 billion), eliminating the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program utilized by teachers (cutting \$6.4-\$22.4 billion) and restricting or eliminating federal loan subsidies for higher education (\$7-\$21.6 billion).

Currently, Pell Grants are the largest source of federal grant aid to low-income students for undergraduate education. 7.2 million students in the US receive them,

based on income. Under conditions where food insecurity and even homelessness have become a significant problem among college students, the CBO blandly suggests that students who lose their Pell Grants could take on debt as they would “be eligible for \$3,500 or more in federal loans that are interest-free while students are in school.”

The CBO implies that this increased debt could be a positive benefit as it would “help” students realize the “difficulty” they will face later in life should they borrow for college.

*Cutting child nutrition programs. “This option would convert SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps] and the child nutrition programs to separate, smaller block grants to the states beginning in October 2019. The block grants would provide a set amount of funding to states each year, and states would be allowed to make significant changes to the structure of the programs,” the report states.

The budget analysts say this approach would reduce total spending on child nutrition programs by \$88 billion, while savings for SNAP would be \$160 million over the same period. Spending on child nutrition programs like school lunch totaled \$23 billion in fiscal 2018.

Already the Trump Agriculture Department has announced that it would roll back the regulations governing school lunches that were introduced by the Obama administration in 2010. Echoing the “ketchup is a vegetable” assault on child health by the Reagan administration, schools will no longer have to provide “whole-grain rich” food which contains at least 50 percent whole grains at every meal, they will have more time to reduce sodium levels, and flavored milk will now be offered to children participating in school meal programs. These changes will take effect this year.

The Congressional Budget Office’s “options” contrast sharply not only with the nearly unlimited money funneled to the military but also with the lavish tax cuts showered on the ultra-wealthy. Last year’s tax cuts pushed by Trump and supported by the Democrats, resulted in a massive \$1.5 trillion windfall to the major corporations and the super-rich. The nation’s most profitable companies were handed billions of dollars—Walmart \$1.6 billion, Bank of America \$2.4 billion and Apple \$4.5 billion—further driving up the federal debt which the financial elite now expects the working class to pay.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact